

# Stories of the 1918 Flu Pandemic

## The Spanish Flu in Strathcona, Vancouver

At the time of the Spanish flu outbreak, the community of Strathcona was perhaps the most diverse neighbourhood in the city of Vancouver. The community was home to Coast Salish peoples and many displaced Indigenous people as well as Chinese, Japanese, Jewish, Italian, Black, East Indian immigrants and European settlers. At a population of roughly 7,000, the Chinese populace was the largest community within Vancouver. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese Canadians faced continuous **persecution** by the Canadian state. The most **egregious** example of this oppression occurred when the Federal government imposed a fixed fee to every Chinese person entering Canada. **Infamously** known as the Chinese Head Tax, all Chinese immigrants were forced to pay \$500 in order to enter the country at the time of the pandemic. Additionally, Chinese Canadians and other minority groups faced constant **discrimination** and racism at an individual level from the dominant Anglo-Protestant population.



Chinese vendors on East Pender Street (now Dupont Street), 1904. Vancouver Public Library, 6729.

Multiple waves of the Spanish Flu hit Vancouver from October 1918 until March 1919. Strathcona and Chinatown were among the hardest hit neighbourhoods of the city. According to an article published by The Chinese Times, a local Chinese paper, the infection and mortality rates of Chinese Canadians in Vancouver were

almost twice as high compared to white middle-class residents. **Socio-economic** factors played a role in this development, as Chinese residents often lived in overcrowded houses and lacked funds to access modern medical care. Moreover, western hospitals often treated Chinese Canadians like second class citizens by refusing their treatment, or like in the case of Vancouver General Hospital, **relegating** them to the basement of the building.

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Boarded-up buildings on Carrall Street, Vancouver following an Anti-Chinese riot, ca 1907. Vancouver Public Library 940.

At the height of the pandemic, Chinese Canadians and other minority groups continued to face **maltreatment** by the dominant white population. Many Vancouver citizens blamed immigrant communities in Strathcona and Chinatown for contributing to the

infection because they felt their “supposed backwards culture” and poor living conditions could act as a breeding ground for diseases. Additionally, newspaper coverage criticized Chinese hospitals and **berated** the community’s failure to report flu cases and deaths to the **relevant** authorities. On the other side, The Chinese Times **condemned** the number of health inspections and police raids that took place within the community. As Ellen Scheinberg points out, despite the **abominable** treatment of Chinese Canadians from the state and local population, the Vancouver community developed the **infrastructure** to support each other during an unimaginable catastrophe. Many Strathcona flu victims visited a Chinese Hospital located at 106 East Pender Street, where they were treated with traditional Chinese medicines and therapy techniques.

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## The Cree of Onion Lake's Response to the Spanish Flu

Situated 50 km north of Lloydminster, Alberta, the Cree people of the Onion Lake Reserve were hit hard by the Spanish flu. Like many Indigenous communities across Canada, the region lacked resources to limit the spread of the virus and care for the sick. With little support from the Federal government, many Indigenous communities turned to traditional methods to fight the influenza. In response to the threat of the Spanish flu, the Chief and Councillors of Onion Lake **petitioned** the Indian Affairs Department for permission to hold a two-day Sun Dance festival in the summer of 1919.

The Sun Dance is a traditional ceremony of the Plains Cree that is held in the summer to honour the Sun and other spirits. However, the Sun Dance, like many other forms of Indigenous spirituality were prohibited in 1885 by an **amendment** to the Indian Act. The Federal Government viewed Indigenous forms of cultural expression as backward and outlawing its practice served as one of the first steps in their goal of **assimilating** the Indigenous population.



An Indigenous man at Onion Lake, ca 1920. Anglican Church of Canada General Synod Archives, P75-103 S7-106.

Overall, the Spanish flu devastated the community of Onion Lake. In November 1918, Indian Affairs Agent Sibbald reported that out of the forty five children at Onion Lake Catholic Boarding School, all but one were "laid up with the sickness along with eight of the ten sisters." According to Agent Sibbald, the entire group were in a "**precarious** condition," as the community physician was too busy with other cases to come to the school. While four Sisters from St-Paul-des-Métis came to provide assistance, in the course of their arrival seven Indigenous and two "non-treaty" children died. In the aftermath of the incident, North West Police Officers brought the bodies to a trench through a potato field instead of the main road so they would not frighten the remaining children and waited until night to bury the bodies.

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Male Students at St. Barnabas Indian Residential School, Onion Lake ca. 1920, Anglican Church of Canada General Synod Archives, P7538 338.

On March 6, 1919, the Chief and Councillors of Onion Lake sent a letter to Duncan Campbell Scott, the head of the

Department of Indian Affairs, asking for permission to hold a Sun Dance on their reserve in the upcoming summer. The Indian Department denied the request, but the Onion Lake Band decided to move forward with their plans. On June 23<sup>rd</sup> Agent Sibbald and two North West Mounted Police officers arrived at the reserve to prevent an ongoing Sun ceremony. A tense standoff between the federal government agents and the Indigenous band occurred when “Chief Robert defied the police.” According to Agent Sibbald, Chief Robert “went as far as to say that the Sergeant might put a bullet through his brains as he felt like that was the only thing that would stop him.” However, due to fear of violence, the Onion Lake band ultimately called off the Sun Dance ceremony.

While the leaders of the Onion Lake Reserve wished to hold a ceremony in response to the death and destruction caused by the Spanish flu, they were denied due to the Federal government’s goal of **eliminating** and assimilating the local Indigenous population.